

**PLATTE RIVER RECOVERY IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM (PRRIP -or- Program)****Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) Virtual Meeting**

Wednesday, April 14, 2021; 1:00-4:00 PM CST

*Meeting held online via MS Teams***Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)****State of Wyoming**

Barry Lawrence - Member

Jeremy Manley - Alternate

**Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation)**

Brock Merrill - Member

**State of Colorado**

Jojo La - Member

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service)**

Matt Rabbe - Member

Tom Econopouly - Alternate

**State of Nebraska**

Elizabeth Esseks - Member

**Environmental Entities**

Rich Walters - Member

Melissa Mosier - Alternate

**Upper Platte Water Users**

n/a

**Colorado Water Users**

n/a

**Downstream Water Users**

Dave Zorn - Member

Jim Jenniges – Member

Brandi Flyr - Member

**Other Participants**

Jeff Runge - USFWS

Michelle Koch - NGPC

**Executive Director's Office (EDO)**

Jason Farnsworth, ED

Justin Brei

Patrick Farrell

Malinda Henry

Mallory Jaymes

Kaley Keldsen

Kari Mohlman

Chad Smith

Tom Smrdel

Tim Tunnell

Kevin Werbylo



## **WELCOME & ADMINISTRATIVE**

Merrill called the meeting to order at 1:02 PM Central Time.

## **AGENDA MODIFICATIONS**

No agenda modifications were made.

## **MINUTES**

**TAC MOTION:** *Walters moved and Rabbe seconded to approve the January 6, 2021 TAC Virtual Meeting minutes. Minutes approved.*

[01\\_06\\_21\\_PRRIP\\_TAC\\_Virtual\\_Meeting\\_Minutes\\_Approved](#)

## **LAND MANAGEMENT**

Tunnell provided an update to the 2019001 Bergren Land Management Plan reviewed and discussed at the October 30, 2020 TAC meeting. CHLOETA provided an estimated cost of \$306.78/acre for burning of the 65 acres of riparian woodland on the Bergren tract. CHLOETA has cancelled their spring burn season due to COVID. This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of 3-year contract with CHLOETA, and we may be able to get later burns in the fall done by them. Tunnell asked for guidance from the TAC on the following:

1. Given the cost, is fire still a viable strategy for Bergren?
2. Is there consensus from the TAC to use an alternative strategy, using clear and grub to remove trees on Bergren instead of prescribed fire?

Tunnell presented a revised tree removal plan for Bergren together with Robinson as an alternative, if that is what the TAC decides.

Rabbe reminded the group that original prescribed fire costs were for 10 years of prescribed fire. Costs associated with clear and grub to initially remove the trees instead of prescribed fire would be considerably less. Tunnell agreed and referred the TAC to the initial land management plan for a cost comparison. Rabbe pointed out that TAC guidance in October was to investigate the viability of restoration via prescribed fire. If not viable, Rabbe supports the alternative. This alternative strategy has already been approved by the TAC during the October 30, 2020 meeting as an option if prescribed fire would not be feasible. Merrill asked for any further discussion or opposition to this alternative.

Esseks asked whether \$300/acre is a reasonable estimate. Tunnell says costs were not itemized, but per acre price is higher than grassland rate due to additional manpower, mop up and slash on the site.

Hearing no additional questions or objections to this alternative, Merrill said that the TAC had already provided its guidance to move ahead with the alternative strategy. Fall bid package for Chapman Complex Habitat Enhancement will be developed to include clearing & grubbing on Both Robinson and McDonald tracts. Tunnell also asked for TAC members to send names and contact information of Rx Fire contractors that may be interested in burning for the Program.

[Bergren Tract Restoration Strategy Update Memo](#)

## **WATER MANAGEMENT**

Werbylo gave a summary of the Broad Scale Recharge Project at Cottonwood Ranch. The project was designed to re-time flows into the Platte River during deficits, for which the Program receives credit. An additional benefit is that the project can provide wetland habitat for waterfowl and whooping cranes. Construction was completed in 2019. In July, August, and September of 2020 the project was filled three times to test infrastructure and monitor success. Do berms and gates perform as expected? Can we



control it from on-site as well as remotely? What does the habitat look like when there is water in the cells? All in good working order. In 2021 the project was filled through natural rainfall in mid-March. Several hundred acres of wetland habitat for cranes during Spring migration. At this point in mid-April, there has been no documented whooping crane use of the site in 2021. Moving forward, a fence will be installed at the site that will allow grazing but keep livestock off the berms, and cells will be filled with excess water when available. Mosier asked if there a wildlife monitoring plan in place for this property. Henry said it is included in our WC monitoring protocol, but nothing formal in place for other species such as wetland birds or waterfowl.

#### [Broad Scale Recharge Project - 2021 Update](#)

#### **SPRING 2021 WHOOPING CRANE UPDATE**

Jaymes gave a brief update on on-going Spring 2021 whooping crane monitoring efforts. To date six individuals have been observed by PRRIP thus far. Sitting at about 1% of the Aransas Wood Buffalo population now. This is on the lower end for Spring at this point. Rabbe said that another six or so sightings were reported to the Service that were not sighted by PRRIP, so a total of about twelve individuals this season. Most birds have migrated through the central Platte already. Rabbe noted that we have seen the highest use in the Rainwater Basins this year than we have seen in a decade. Lots of rain and sediment removal in the Basins. Close to 30 birds have used it so far this season. With suitable habitat situated 15 miles south of us, the birds probably stopped in the Basins before they encountered the Platte.

#### **2021 LEAST TERN & PIPING PLOVER PREDATOR MANAGEMENT ACTIONS AND MONITORING UPDATE**

Henry gave a presentation summarizing 2021 LT/PP additional predator management actions and monitoring efforts to be implemented in 2021.

Jenniges asked about defining a specific number of chicks or fledges for determining whether management actions were successful. He pointed out the investment of resources into predator management without a clearly defined determinate of success. Henry cited high reproductive investment and low reproductive success at Kearney Broadfoot South. If we could improve that ratio through implementing a predator fence and lighting, that would be success. Leaman as well. We have fledged no chicks from the site over the last couple of years. Any chicks fledged at Leaman would be a success. Jenniges asked again about cost/benefit ratios, how much do you need to improve productivity to justify the costs? Farnsworth said this is a target species for which the Program is charged with the task of improving productivity. The costs to learn more about how to do this are minimal compared to the money spent by the Program. Henry said that the problem of predation will likely get worse as predators learn, not better. It is important that we use this time to develop techniques to mitigate this problem and test whether they work or not. Runge mentioned the importance of testing a range of predator management options. You can do this one at a time to see what each does, or, if not funds limited, go full out to get maximum impact. Henry stated the ISAC has advised the EDO to go hard on sites like Kearney Broadfoot South where there are lots of birds, high losses, and lots of opportunity for learning.

Rabbe pointed out that pilot data on fencing looks promising in terms of nest success. Henry noted that this may not be due to the fence as it was not a complete barrier during the pilot study. Jenniges asked about the reason for revising river survey design. Henry noted that by sampling the same segment of the river at the same time each survey over multiple surveys and years, there is no way to decouple the effects of time of day from river segment. We need to take what we know about bird



activity patterns into consideration in our survey design. We can't say that birds aren't present at a given river segment because they don't use that stretch (the habitat is bad or there are no off-channel sites near that stretch) or because we always sample it between 12-2 p.m. when the birds are not active or on the river? Jenniges asked about the importance of counting birds on the river if you are just going to assume they came from OCSW sites. Henry said the objective is to locate nesting on the river. That also requires good census techniques. We count birds in addition to that, but it is not our objective. Yes, we do realize that this may be interpreted as double counting, so numbers from OCSW surveys and river surveys should not be summed. Runge suggested that you could use terns to help locate plover nests since terns tend to fly up in response to approach, whereas plovers do not. Zorn commented that logistics will probably alter what we would like to have in terms of survey design. Henry agreed and said the EDO will need to do a post-season evaluation to see if our study design was successful in achieving our goal. Zorn also suggested we collect data on temperature while we do river surveys, not just time of day. Runge said permitting limits surveys to times of day when temperatures are not above or below established limits. Farnsworth said we would have to circle back with the Service to get confirmation on that.

[14 Apr 2021 LTPP Pred Mgmt Monitoring Update](#)

#### **PRRIP PUBLICATIONS**

Farrell gave a brief overview of a newly published *Waterbirds* article for which he was the primary author. The research was a collaborative effort among research partners to look for differences in productivity metrics resulting from differing monitoring protocols, monitoring from within the nesting colony versus outside the nesting colony. The results from this study have been used by the EDO to understand the types of information obtained through each method, and to reduce disturbance to the birds while remaining confident in outside monitoring productivity metrics.

[Farrell and Baasch 2020 Reducing Effort when Monitoring Shorebird Productivity](#)

#### **AMWG PROGRESS REPORT**

Henry gave an overview of the process the AMWG has followed in revising the Science Plan for the extension. Zorn summarized AMWG discussions about the management objective, performance indicators and remaining uncertainties for piping plovers. Rabbe summarized AMWG progress in identifying questions remaining for whooping cranes. Zorn addressed additional learning suggested by the AMWG for improving our understanding of Phragmites and effective means of control. Rabbe followed by reviewing AMWG discussion on how to address wet meadows and other species of concern and whether to include them in the Extension Science Plan. He suggested the formation of a working group to develop an updated list of species of concern, focusing on indicator species like pollinators or migratory birds.

Koch asked about lower utilization of wet meadows by whooping cranes along the central Platte versus the flyway as a whole. Rabbe said that the Program has a hard time defining wet meadows as they occur along the central Platte. Some wet meadows, like Mormon and Shoemaker islands are used more consistently. This may be due to their unique hydrology that makes them less ephemeral.

[14 Apr 2021 AMWG Progress Update](#)

#### **TAC MEETING REVIEW & WRAP-UP**



No action items resulted from the meeting.

No TAC meeting prior to the June GC meeting is expected. Farnsworth mentioned that the EDO is working on developing an RFP and 3-year contract for aircraft and pilots for whooping crane monitoring. This is in response to yearly insurance costs incurred by pilots that do not coincide with a seasonal bid process. This will go to the GC in June for their approval but does not require prior approval by the TAC. **Future TAC meetings** have been set for **July 14<sup>th</sup> and October 13<sup>th</sup>**. Calendar invites were sent out when quarterly meeting dates were established.

**TAC MEETING END**

The TAC meeting concluded at 3:09 PM Central Time.